

# **Icons and the Cosmos:**

## **The Missionary Significance**

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The veneration of icons bears directly on the Orthodox understanding of the visible world, and constitutes therefore what may be uniquely eastern perspective on the spiritual value of the cosmos, putting Orthodoxy in an excellent position to comprehend the traditional, non-Western view of the universe.

Pre-modern societies (defined as those without written language) have universally understood the world in terms of the "sacred." Their oral traditions, their "mythologies," constituted the basis for all meaningful activity. "In the beginning..." the stories begin. And whatever was done then, "in those days," must be remembered and repeated by all succeeding generations, for the "beginning" established forever the norms for proper human behaviour.

In imitating the actions of the first people or the spirits at the beginning of time, pre-modern peoples sought to become contemporaneous with the time of origins. Life is filled with meaning, and even simple mundane tasks transformed into meaningful and, in fact, eternally significant actions, by the conscious ritualization of daily life, "in remembrance" of the deeds first accomplished "in those days." The time of chronological history,

linear time, exists only as meaningless, profane time. Time spent *returning* to eternal modes, imitating the archetypes, becomes sacred and “cosmic,” for history is abolished and one lives once again outside it.

Not only time but space is also transformed by the activity of pre-modern society. Certain locations can be eternally significant – epiphanies. When building his house, the pre-modern man deliberately follows an eternal plan, constructing his dwelling according to the structure of the universe itself, a structure he knows from the sacred stories. His hut or tent, no matter how humble, represents to the group a replica of the cosmos. One’s house is therefore transformed into a sacred space, inhabited by people who know the eternal standards for human behaviour, just as the created world is occupied by those whose knowledge of the sacred stories enables them to live as human beings were meant to live. Life is meaningful indeed, drenched with meaning, because it is filled with the sacred.

Christianity has irreparably broken all this, for it has declared history to be significant, and linear time to be of supreme value. It has destroyed forever “escape” into “cosmic time” as the norm for human existence in this world. But it also has fulfilled, and not abolished, the basic “intuition” of pre-modern societies; the traditional culture was, in fact, correct in its basic insight that there exists an eternal model for human behaviour, and that it is essential for every person to know and imitate it. The traditional society was also correct in acknowledging that certain times and places have eternal significance for all people. Even their constant reference to “the beginning” was not entirely misguided. Yet none of these societies, groping toward the Truth, could have suspected that the eternal model was not a mythological being who lived “in the beginning” before time began, but a person, Jesus Christ, who entered history during the reign of Caesar Augustus. This revelation was totally unexpected even among the Israelites who were expecting it, and it assumed a form they could not accept. No one could have fully anticipated what happened “in those days.”

St. Athanasius the Great wrote: "Our Lord took a body like ours and lived as a man in order that those who had refused to recognize Him as Omnipotent King of the whole universe might come to recognize Him from the works He did here below in the body, that what dwelled in the body was the Word of God."<sup>1</sup>

The British lay theologian, C. S. Lewis, comments that this corresponds perfectly with Jesus' own statements on the subject of His miracles: "The Son can do nothing of Himself except what He sees the Father do," adding:

There is an activity of God displayed throughout creation, a wholesale activity let us say, which men refuse to recognize. The miracles done by God Incarnate, living as a man in Palestine, perform the very same things as this wholesale activity, but at a different speed, and on a smaller scale. One of their chief purposes is that men, having seen a thing done by personal power on a smaller scale, may recognize when they see the same thing done on a large scale that the power behind it is also personal – is indeed the same Person who lived among us two thousand years ago. The miracles, in fact, are re-telling in small letters the same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see... In other words, some of the miracles do locally what God has already done universally: others do locally what He has not yet done but will do. In that sense, and from our human point of view, some are reminders and others are prophecies.

God creates the vine and teaches it to draw up water by its roots and, with the aid of the sun, to turn water into a juice which will ferment and take on certain qualities. Thus each year from Noah's till ours, God turns water into wine. That, men fail to see. Either like the pagans [or pre-modern tribes] they refer the process to some finite spirit, Bacchus or Dionysus, or else like the moderns, they attribute real and ultimate causality to the chemical and other material phenomena which are all that our senses can discover in it. But when Christ at Cana makes water into wine, the mask is off. The miracle has only half its effect if it only convinces us that Christ in God: it will have its full effect if whenever we

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<sup>1</sup> St Athanasius the Great, *On the Incarnation*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975.

see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party in Cana. Every year God makes a little wheat into much wheat: the seed is sown and there is an increase, and men according to the fashion of their age say "It is Ceres," "It is Adonis," "It is the Corn King," or else "It is the laws of Nature." The close up, the translation of this annual wonder is the feeding of the five thousand. Bread is not made out of nothing. Bread is not made from stones... A little bread is made into much bread. The Son will do nothing except what He sees the Father do. There is, so to speak, a family style.

When He fed the thousands He multiplied fish as well as bread. Look in every bay and almost every river. This swarming pulsating fecundity show He is still at work. The ancient Greeks had a god called Genius – the god of animal and human fertility... This miraculous multiplication of fish reveals the real Genius.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the pre-modern societies were ignorant of the real "identity" of the giver of life, but their basic intuition that there is a sacred (rather than the modern attitude that there is a "natural" power "behind" the cosmos) was essentially valid from a Christian viewpoint. It has never been the goal of Orthodox mission, therefore, to suppress this "intuition" among newly baptized peoples, but only to reveal and proclaim the true identity of the Genius. True Christianity, in order to be true to Christ, the alpha and omega, must be all-encompassing, all-fulfilling, i.e. catholic, rejoicing in all that is true wherever it is found.

This is also the case with the pre-modern concept of time, except that the important era is no longer cosmic but historical, the days of Caesar Augustus. The basic concept of the eternal model who must be remembered and imitated is equally valid, except that the models are not mythical creatures or spirits, but the God-Man Jesus Christ. Christians also strive to participate in the eternally significant actions of "those days," especially in the sacramental life of the church. In receiving the Eucharist, the time and space that separate the believer from the upper room is abolished. We receive what the apostles did, the same bread, the same cup. Our life, in

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Miracles," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Walter Hooper, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970, pp. 29-30.

historic time is supposed to be a reflection and imitation of His, as our circumstances and energy allow. Each Christian is summoned to become a "little Christ," and the saints are simply those who in earlier generations have been recognized by the church as having succeeded by the grace of God in becoming what the rest are still striving for. The crucial time is *now*, the critical place is *here*.

Orthodox Christianity celebrates this cosmic component in iconography. The eternally significant events of "those days" are written in colour and form, just as they are described in verbal images biblically.

### **Holy Images**

Most Christians East and West readily assent to the basic traditional doctrines defined by earlier Ecumenical Councils. They agree that Jesus of Nazareth is fully God and fully man, that he was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried, and rose from the dead, after which he ascended into heaven and sent forth the Holy Spirit to guide and sanctify his mystical Body; the Church, whose function it is to proclaim his death and resurrection until He comes again to judge the living and dead and transform the universe into His kingdom. The degree to which that kingdom, which is to come is already manifest in this world; however, is a major point of contention among Christians, with some sects insisting on total incompatibility (and, as in the extreme case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, even insisting that this world must be completely annihilated in order for the "New Heaven" and "New Earth" to emerge), while the Orthodox believe that the two already interpenetrate each other.

The basis for the Orthodox position rests solidly on biblical evidence. The image of the "world to come" is Christ himself, most especially after his resurrection. Then he appeared suddenly in the upper room, the doors being shut, and his disciples were at first afraid that it was only a ghost that they saw. The Lord however insisted that it was really He himself and not a ghost, for "a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have."<sup>3</sup> Obviously Christ was not the same as He had been. His friends did not immediately

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:39.

recognize Him on the road to Emmaus. He could appear and disappear unexpectedly, yet He ate with the apostles, and allowed them to touch Him. Thus, the risen Lord, as the “first fruits of those who are asleep,” reveals that his kingdom is not totally “spiritualized” to the extent that the physical dimension is eliminated. Of course, the material body is radically transformed or rather restored to its original perfection, but it is not destroyed. It is the resurrection, perhaps even more than the nativity that justifies the Orthodox belief that the creation will share in the transfiguration of the universe, that the physical world participates in eternity, and has an essential function to serve both now and in the kingdom.

One could mention here dozens of scriptural passages indicating the biblical foundations for this positive view of the cosmos, beginning with the first chapter of *Genesis* (for the world was called “very good”), and ending with the epistles of the Apostle Paul (*Romans* 8; *Colossians* 1; *Ephesians* 1; 1 *Timothy* 4), with a large number of Psalms (8, 19, 24, 66, etc.) in between. In this respect, the culmination of Christ’s saving work can be understood in terms of his ascension, which made it possible for him to fill “all things” (*Ephesians* 1:23) with Himself. But all these references could be completely “spiritualized,” that is, understood metaphorically or in an allegorical sense, were it not for the bodily resurrection. In fact, the incarnation itself might have been robbed of its meaning if, after rising from the tomb, Jesus returned to his original condition – took off, as it were, the body he had temporarily assumed or if that body had been totally spiritualized and no longer resembled “flesh and bones.” It is the resurrection that emphatically demonstrates the eternal value of the physical body, that it will be transformed, “made new,” but not annihilated. Of all the major world religions, Christianity alone affirms the eternal significance of the cosmos.

Iconoclasm, past and present, represents precisely a rejection of the inherent worth of the created universe. It is an attempt to reduce religion to the “spiritual” and thus “liberate” the physical world from “theological constraints.” This is, of course, generally what has occurred in the West over the last five centuries: religious life and theological thought have been increasingly restricted to discussion of the written Word. One could learn

about God from the Bible; its proper interpretation became the sole task of theology. Experts debated the finer points of exegesis, but the world as such was considered irrelevant or at best the source for some illustrative points about the Creator. Christianity became more and more a private affair between individual believers and their Saviour, with the importance of the Church and its sacraments questioned, and later even denied by some groups. The place of the creation was totally ignored not only by theologians but in the popular consciousness of the average believer as well, wherever iconoclasm prevailed. Even in the Roman Catholic tradition, where the use of images was not rejected, their function was reduced to that of visual aides, rather than understood as an integral part of the total revelation.

In the East, however, the liturgical texts themselves perpetuated the conscious apprehension of the sacred in the created world. Not only is the cosmos directly involved in certain festal observances (especially at Epiphany and Pentecost), but every baptism requires the sanctification of water, the purpose of which is exactly the reaffirmation of the "sacramental" character of the cosmos. Every significant liturgical action requires both a physical and spiritual element, as a formal testimony to the incarnation and resurrection. The interpenetration of the historic and eternal, the "linear" and "circular" concepts of time, and the human and divine co-operation necessary to accomplish the salvation of the world is proclaimed by the form as well as the content of Orthodox worship.

For this reason, the question of the *style* of iconography becomes theological rather than merely aesthetic. The icon must, of course, depict an historic event or person, as any art does, but it must do so in such a way as to convey its eternal significance or rather its transfiguration. Any painting that depicts only the outward appearance of a person or scene cannot be truly "iconographic" in a traditional Orthodox sense. The style must convey an inner or eternal dimension, and not merely excite the emotions. This explains, for example, the difference in approach East and West have evolved in depicting the crucifixion. The Western theological and artistic emphasis has been traditionally on Christ's suffering, and paintings of the crucified Lord tend to underline his agony, drawing special attention to the

expression of pain in his eyes, and to the loss of blood. In the East, Christ's eyes are most often closed, and the flow of blood either highly stylized or practically ignored, for it is His death that destroys death, and this eternal fact the iconographer is proclaiming in colour and line. It is the purpose of the first to elicit an emotional response from the believer. It is the goal of the second to present a doctrinal truth, an historic event with eternal significance.

In order to paint (or more accurately, to *write*) an icon, the iconographer must spiritually and therefore physically prepare himself/herself with prayer and fasting. His/her materials represent animals, vegetable and mineral products: egg yolk mixed with soil, applied to a wooden surface. A traditional icon is itself a re-ordered microcosm, created by a human artist or community of painters (with each member "specializing" in just one aspect of the process), but re-created in such a way as to testify to the Good News. Not only the heavens declare the glory of God, but all creation, properly understood, testifies to his majesty, omnipotence, wisdom and love. All creation, wrote St. John of Damascus, is the icon of God. This is to say that while the world is not itself divine, it is nevertheless God's "self-portrait." It is the "symbol" of the Creator, in the sense that without being Him, it manifests Him, though, of course, in an incomplete way. In this sense, the Bible itself as written *words* (which are actually spoken symbols, printed on paper) is also an icon, an image. The Seventh Ecumenical Council directed that the Book of the Gospel and painted icons should both be venerated in the public worship of the Church. Neither the Book nor the icon, neither word nor image, fully "reveal" or totally exhaust the fullness of God, but both do witness to Him. Ultimately the only way human beings can convey any knowledge, any of their experience to one another is through images, spoken, written or painted. And it is the same Lord who communicates Himself to humanity in His creation, and more directly in His revelation, as He dealt with His people in the Old Testament and appeared to them, spoke to them, died and rose from them, in the New. All His acts in *history* have been remembered and transmitted to us in words and symbols, but His initial and on-going action – creation – is directly apprehensible to every person.



The use and veneration of icons has prevented Eastern Christianity from reducing its theological vision to "*sola scriptura*." No book, not even the Holy Bible, is totally sufficient to reveal God. The Word of God is not a book, but a person, the divine incarnate Logos. This person, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour, reveals himself to humanity not only in scripture but outside it, for He cannot be limited to any images, the words *about* God, with the Word himself. As iconoclasts accuse the Orthodox of "idolatry," the Orthodox in turn accuse the iconoclasts of "bibliolatry," of forgetting that words are also images, and do not exhaust the revelation given by God in Jesus Christ. The Evangelist John even states that if all were to be written, the world itself could not contain the books that would have to be written. Painted icons, properly written, therefore represent the Church's use of the created world to proclaim its faith "in words and images," and the re-creation of the material world, re-forming it to produce in colour what the scriptures do with morphemes.

The material world has a function in proclaiming the history of salvation. It is through the physical universe that human beings come to understand and to "know God" as St. John states in his first Epistle: "What we have heard with our ears and seen with our eyes and touched with our hands we also proclaim to you."<sup>4</sup> Modern Orthodox profess the same. Among all Christians, the Orthodox are the only ones who pray with eyes open.

What is more, the total arrangement of icons in the Orthodox temple manifests the presence of the kingdom already inaugurated, though not fully realized. The building has two axes, one running north-south, the other west-east (the direction the entire building faces). Along the first axis stands the iconostas, the icon screen, on which can be "read" the chronological "history of salvation" from left to right. The icons proclaim that in the past, God became flesh of the virgin, and that in the future he will come again to judge the world and fully restore his kingdom. Between these two icons stands the throne or altar, just behind the royal doors – the central gates through which passes the King of Glory, in the Eucharist *now*. Along the other axis one passes from the vestibule (the world) into the nave (the

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<sup>4</sup> 1 John 1:1.

Church) and through the royal doors into the kingdom, which is to come, the personal and collective path of the believers. Dominating the entire structure is the circular dome in which the all-encompassing Lord of Glory, Christ Pantokrator, sits enthroned as alpha and omega, He who has filled all things with Himself. The church building itself, together with the icons within it, serves as a microcosm in a more elaborate and Christian way, but its function parallels that of the pre-modern culture's concept of what a house should be. This is; however, *Beth-el* – the House of God, and Orthodox architecture and art together proclaim the validity of both "linear" and "circular" concepts of time. The temple is itself an icon just as Orthodox worship strives to reflect the beauty and majesty of the kingdom to come.

Without minimizing the historical dimension so essential to the Christian faith, Orthodoxy admits the valid concepts of time and space of pre-modern peoples as being constitutive of spiritual life itself. All religious behaviour presupposes an archetype, which is necessarily *past*. In imitating the divine model, the past is made present and the present moment acquires significance. Pre-modern cultures knew this and Eastern Christianity has incorporated this insight without minimizing the basic historical uniqueness of the biblical faith.

Iconoclasts everywhere, both past and present, have been unable to do this, for it is impossible to maintain the catholicity (fullness) of the faith as universally true within an iconoclastic theology, because iconoclasm, in rejecting the material world and its eternal significance, can never be "full." Thus, iconoclastic traditions have been forced to present Christianity as an alternative faith, which demands the renunciation and destruction of the pre-Christian religious experience of a society. Having renounced religious art within their own churches, iconoclasts have desecrated the shrines and traditional arts of a thousand tribes on every continent. Their gospel is presented uncompromisingly as a radical departure from the past, which is condemned as barbarous and demonic.

Certainly there are almost everywhere certain aspects of "primitive" religious life that are, from a Christian perspective, satanic, some even deliberately so. What the Christian iconoclast fails to see is that he is

replacing partial error with partial truth, and such a mission can only be partial evangelization. Those aspects of the pre-Christian culture that survive are likely to be the least compatible with Christian doctrine, for these will be the ones hidden from the missionaries' view, driven "underground." If a more tolerant attitude toward indigenous culture is adopted, as iconodules have traditionally done, the aspects of that culture most amiable to the Gospel will be "baptized" and will survive openly, while the more negative customs or beliefs, less compatible with the Christian faith, will gradually disappear.

In the short run, radical iconoclasm may produce a larger visible group of fervent converts, whose grandchildren will want to return or express an interest in returning to the "old ways," and consider their elders as the generation that betrayed the tribal cultural heritage and identity. In the long run, the iconodule approach will permit the "old ways" themselves to become an integral part of the new faith, so that the grandchildren will consider Christianity "their own."

The theological vision of Orthodox Christianity considers the veneration of images essential to the fullness of the Christian gospel. The implications of this doctrine extend beyond church art and architecture to a worldview, and a theology of mission. Icon veneration represents the Orthodox affirmation of the essential goodness of the created world, and as such leads theologically (as it has, in fact, historically) to tolerant, all-embracing attitude toward traditional cultures. By insisting that the cosmos is itself a theophany, the Orthodox have been able to appreciate non-Western cultures that have celebrated this truth, rather than condemning or attempting to recreate them in the name of evangelization. While it has never been possible (even for the Jews) to accept Christianity without major adjustments to a society's vision of reality, and every nation has undergone considerable change with its acceptance of the Gospel, it has been nevertheless true that whatever was best in that pre-Christian tradition – its language, art, music, etc. – has been not only preserved but supported and encouraged, insofar as these served to enrich the Church. Thus Orthodoxy, wherever it has taken root, has become "indigenous" within a few generations, in Alaska, Uganda, Finland, and Japan as much as in Eastern

Europe and the Middle East. This stems directly from the theological vision of the world ratified in 787 by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, defining a consistent Christian worldview that has inspired not only artists, but missionaries ever since.

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